ELEMENTARY EDUCATION.

NEW METHODS DISCUSSED AT REIGATE.

A meeting of the Reigate, Redhill, and District Branch of the Parents' National Educational Union had been convened to be held at Reigate House, Reigate (by kind permission of Mrs. Earle), on Monday afternoon, at which Mr. Willingham F. Rawnsley, M.A., J.P., had consented to give a lecture, entitled "New Methods in Elementary Education." Owing to acceptances of invitation by 90 teachers, in addition to some 30 others, the meeting was held at Reigate Grammar School. Tea was provided at 4.30 p.m.

"OUR SPLENDID TROOPS."

Mr. Rawnsley, who was introduced by the Rev. Walter Earle, spoke for an hour. Opening with a reference to the new Education Bill, he declared Mr. Fisher was right in what he said of the appeal which a library of good books had made on struggling students all over the country. The war had shown us that in spite of all its shortcomings the education given in our elementary schools, as well as that given in our public schools, had not been so bad as many would have had us believe. No finer spirited lads had ever been produced than those who sprang to arms at once after their public school and university training, and no more splendid troops ever faced a foe than the men of education who had received their education in our elementary schools. Both officers and men had shown great qualities of mind and soul, and had certainly not fallen short of the best traditions in physical fortitude and fighting power; and was it not fair to credit their school training with much of this intelligence and spirit? He heartily re-echoed the appeal of Mr. Edward Holmes, late chief inspector of elementary schools for England, to give the child freedom, but he (the speaker) added to that, give him books, and the result would show, even if some might hesitate to accept Mr. Holmes' optimism when he spoke of the general orientation of the child's nature towards good, that his phrase about the limitless resources of capacity in the child was a real inspiration. It was this upon the method he wished chiefly to speak of that might be based: the capacity of the child's mind. It mattered not in what rank of life the child might be, the mind was there, and capable of limitless expansion by its own proper exertion. The child was, in fact, eager to obtain knowledge, and quick to discriminate between the good and the inferior and to feed itself when the chance was given to it; ever increasing in its power of assimilating, and ever getting more and more delight as it turned to "fresh woods and pastures new."

TEACHING BY "THE HUMANITIES."

Having made a brief reference to the Montessori system, on which he offered some comments, the lecturer plunged into his main theme. He said about two years ago Miss Mason, at Ambleside, told him of the new method of education which had been started in a Yorkshire school. She was keenly interested in the experiment, believing it had very great possibilities, and she asked him, when he could, to visit the school. The method, she told him, was to teach children by "the humanities," that was, by giving them really good English literature, and by getting them to read this in considerable quantity, always taking a whole book, or a whole period of history, or a whole play or long poem. Further, no snippets or selections were to be allowed, and no memorising of lessons. The child was to form its own mental picture of the scenes read, and thus to keep them in its mind. From the lowest forms upward the teaching was to be done in all literary subjects by the teachers reading with clear enunciation, and in an interested manner, at first about half a page, increasing in quantity as the child advanced in capability, until some five pages or so would be read, of a book of sufficient interest to arrest. This must only be read once, that was the great point, and then a child was called on to stand up and say back again what it had just heard. Each child in turn was called on to take up its parable—and it was most amusing to see how eager they all were to be selected for narrations—and as they all knew it would only be read to them once, they could not afford not to attend, and so lose their only chance. Hence a habit of close attention, which soon gave each child the power of fixing and retaining in its mind anything it heard. Moreover, as, in their narrative, they used the very words of the book, with occasional breaks into their own natural home language, they soon formed their sentences on the style of the book, and so, since only good literature was supplied, they began to speak and write in a cultivated and excellent manner. The term "humanities" (the things which had to do with the thoughts and acts of mankind, as recorded in literature and history) was to many people not a very intelligible one. It really was a translation of the term "litterae humaniores," used at Oxford to designate the final classical schools. The school embraced the best classical literature, history, and philosophy; and, as that study of mankind had always been found to give the best training to fit men's minds for taking up work in any walk of life to which they might afterwards be called, so, after 20 years or more of experience with the methods in the P.N.E.U., Miss Mason conceived the plan he had just described of utilising the best English literature for training the minds of the children in elementary schools. In doing this she started with the assumption—the truth of which the new method had proved to be well grounded—that the mind of every normal child was of much the same quality, though of different calibre, and capable of receiving the same training and producing very similar results, quite irrespective of the social class to which the child belonged. Then it was laid down that each child was a person, and to be treated as such, and looked upon as able to assimilate any good mind-food presented to it, and to feel delight in so doing. The usual elementary school teaching doubtless imparted some knowledge and gave some sort of pleasure, but it brought with it also, to the majority of the children, a sense of weariness, and a feeling of "what was the use of all this?" The idea that one must by constant repetition of the facts hammer them in to the unwilling as well as to the willing mind, was one which must be got rid of entirely if learning was to advance and to give delight. The lecturer gave some very interesting experiences of visits paid to elementary schools to study the new method, of which he spoke in terms of praise. In conclusion, he said, if asked to sum up the results which were claimed for this method, we should say they were first of all an improved school attendance, also a lifting of the tone of the school and a multiplication of interests for the children to whom it opened so many doors, a greatly increased intelligence, a power of close attention, a command of language, and a facility in expressing their thoughts. Added to this, large classes in the upper part of the school presented no difficulty. Lastly, there was the promotion of good relations with the parents. Finally, no one could fail to be struck, in visiting these schools, with the improvement in manner and discipline; and the greatly cultivated voice. Interest in the lecture was enhanced by the charm with which Mr. Rawnsley read a number of narrations, written at the end of the term, by children of ages from 8 to 12, which, he declared, was to him something in the nature of a revelation of the powers of the infant mind.

Miss Reynolds (who spoke of her introduction of the system at [illegible] School), Miss Anderton, and Mr. W. Orme, took part in an interesting discussion.

Mr. Rawnsley replied to points raised. In answer to Mr. Earle, who said there were an immense number of people who were going through the drudgery of teaching children to read, and inquired whether under the system described, the difficulties would be less, the lecturer said if children first learned to listen attentively, and knew the excellent things there were in books, their keenness to learn to read was stimulated.

At the close Mr. Orme was thanked for placing a room at the disposal of the meeting.